A qualitative study on Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs)[1] participation in development

Executive Summary

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Introduction

According to Art 32 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the cooperation "in partnership with relevant international and regional organizations and civil society, in particular organizations of persons with disabilities" should be an integral part of supporting inclusion processes in partner countries of development cooperation. Germany has signed and ratified the CRPD in 2009.

This is why the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH - Global Project "Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities" - and the Christoffel-Blindenmission (CBM) are working jointly on developing a toolbox that assists experts working in German development cooperation as well as political decision-makers in their effort to ensure effective participation of DPOs.

Methodology

This summary provides an overview of the most important results from a joint qualitative study conducted in November and December 2020, consisting of 18 interviews with DPO (10) and GIZ (8) representatives from around the world. Interviews were analysed using the qualitative method of thematic coding. The aim of the study was to identify existing barriers to, as well as indicators for,

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[1] Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), sometimes also referred to as Organization of Persons with Disabilities, OPD). For purposes of consistency and simplicity the abbreviation DPO will be used throughout the text.

successful participation of/ collaboration with DPOs, in particular for German development cooperation. All interviewees had experience working on disability inclusion in development cooperation.

Results from this qualitative study served as the basis for stakeholder discussions in an ensuing workshop on the issue of DPO participation. This workshop was virtually held on the 21st January 2021 and attended by the original interviewees, as well as by additional DPO, GIZ and CBM guests. The results of the study and of the aforementioned discussions will serve as a basis for the development of the toolbox for effective participation of DPOs mentioned above.

Results from the interviews

The following part will provide a brief overview of the key findings from the qualitative interviews. The interviews and analysis were structured along the following thematic categories:

Consideration of DPOs in development projects

Representatives of CBM asked interviewees different questions about the participation of DPOs in development processes, aiming to find answers to the following questions: Are DPO suggestions considered? Are some DPOs more likely to be included or excluded than others?

Varied experiences, non-consideration common

Experiences varied, for instance, depending on the project, the partner or the phase of the project. From our results it still appears to be a common experience that DPOs do not get invited to make suggestions in participation processes. The same number of interviewees (11 out of 16 who contributed in this part) experienced both consideration of DPO suggestions and a lack of consideration of DPO suggestions. A superficial consideration of DPOs' suggestions seemed to be a relatively common experience. For instance, many DPO representatives reported that they were invited to participate, but eventually their suggestions could not be found in the final documents or were not taken into account in the implementation of activities. Others mentioned that they were only asked for inputs once everything had already been decided.

Systematic vs. punctual involvement: DPOs often dissatisfied

Systematic involvement of DPOs in all project phases appears to be rare. It seems more common that DPO are involved at specific points only, for instance only in the planning phase, or only in the implementation phase, when projects are already running. DPO interviewees expressed their dissatisfaction with this approach and stressed that they want to be involved more systematically across all project phases. On the other hand, a GIZ employee mentioned, that within the GIZ the view increases that a punctual involvement of DPOs only at specific crucial points of a project can be very helpful.

Specific groups of persons with disabilities dominate, others remain excluded

Regarding the types of DPOs and/or persons with disabilities most frequently represented there was a widely shared perception among DPO and GIZ participants that particularly DPOs representing persons with visual and physical disabilities are invited to participate in projects and events. Persons with visual impairments were perceived as having strong capacities. A majority

mentioned that persons with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities appear to be excluded from participation processes. One suggestion was that this might be because they are less frequently members of DPOs.

Relationships, successful collaboration and power-imbalances

Another part of our interviews focused on relationships and successful collaboration between DPOs and development actors, such as the GIZ, but also with other civil society organisations (CSOs).

Long-term partnerships and personal relations play an important role

It seemed to be common that cooperation relationships deepened over time between DPOs and GIZ, sometimes even extending on an informal level beyond a particular project. Only a few participants mentioned failed cooperation or an end of relationships. The interviews moreover highlighted the relevance of personal relations between individuals for driving the participation of DPOs. This was seen positively by some since cooperation could be improved by a fixed person of contact. Some GIZ individuals said that they invested their personal time to assist their partner DPO beyond a particular project. Some interviewees noted however that this reliance on personal contacts could create a vacuum if certain individuals left.

Capacity of DPOs: important factor for balanced cooperation

Many participants experienced power-imbalances in their cooperation partnerships. Especially DPOs thought that they were the "weaker" partner, due to their lack of (financial) resources, networks, and their need to advocate for their involvement. However, a remarkably high number of interviewees had also experienced balanced cooperation partnerships. This was usually when the DPO was considered to have strong capacities and when it was involved or perceived as a service provider/ technical expert for disability inclusion.

Cooperation experience leads to trust in capacities of DPOs

The work experience on disability inclusion seems to have sensitized GIZ respondents to the technical capacities of persons with disabilities. Half of them said that they could imagine DPOs taking over responsibilities in GIZ processes, for instance as research consultants, facilitators of events or through employment opportunities within the GIZ.

Collaboration between CSOs – beneficial, but lack of a common agenda can be an issue

Especially DPO participants said that they have experienced DPOs and other Civil Society organisations working together effectively and thus enhancing their respective results through their cooperation. However, two DPO participants also noted that DPOs had been neglected by other CSOs who did not recognize the relevance that the cooperation with DPOs could have for the achievement of their own goals. Two participants mentioned the lack of a common agenda among DPOs in general as a problem.

Barriers to the participation of DPOs

The most commonly identified barriers to the effective participation of DPOs and persons with disabilities were attitudinal barriers, lacking resources and physical/ accessibility barriers.

Attitudinal barriers: negative stereotypes and lack of awareness

Attitudinal barriers to participation were mainly perceived to exist on the side of (potential) partners. Frequently mentioned by both, DPO and GIZ participants, were negative stereotypes about persons with disabilities and their abilities, as well as a lack of awareness of the work of DPOs and of the importance of disability inclusion as a topic. Some participants, however, also mentioned low motivation or a lack of confidence as attitudinal barriers on the side of DPOs.

Lack of resources

Regarding the lack of resources, DPOs' lack of funding and capacity were most commonly mentioned as barriers to effective participation. This corresponds to our results, that strong capacities of DPOs lead to balanced partnerships (see above). But also, time and budget pressures on the side of (potential) partners such as the GIZ were mentioned as a potential barrier to DPO participation. This could also explain why GIZ individuals found it convenient (or effective) to include DPOs as technical experts or only at specific moments of a project.

Physical and accessibility barriers

The physical/ accessibility barriers that were most commonly identified by both sides were those of inaccessible infrastructure and services, including transport and buildings, but also documentation and communications. For instance, many mentioned inaccessible (online) communication environments, the lack of braille documents or the lack of sign-language interpreters at events and activities. Some pointed out that these accessibility problems could have been avoided but were simply not considered in advance. This leads us to our next set of questions, turning around the support offered to DPOs from development partners.

Support offered to DPOs

Considering general and individual accessibility needs

In the experience of our interviewees, the most common way in which DPOs were supported was through the consideration of general and individual accessibility needs (e.g., accessible venues and project activities, interpreters etc.). The second most frequently mentioned form of support was the support with DPOs' advocacy and networking activities. Thirdly, technical assistance with paperwork, contracts and research was a common type of support that DPOs received from their partners. Support to DPOs through direct capacity building occurred, but was mentioned less often. All GIZ participants said that they could make project funds available to support DPO participation, although some mentioned that it would be important to allocate financial resources early in the project cycle.

Risks and potentials of digitalisation

Great potential

Very relevant and interesting in the light of the Covid-19-pandemic are the insights on the use of digital technologies. We asked our participants what potentials and risks they see with regards to the use of digital technologies. In general, digital technologies were seen as a great opportunity for improving the participation of persons with disabilities. From the perspective of the participants

digital technologies could improve participation by offering flexible work and meeting locations and thus circumventing issues with inaccessible infrastructures and transport costs while improving access to information and education. DPOs stated that locational flexibility and assistive technologies could open employment possibilities for persons with disabilities and that digital technologies could make it easier for DPOs to network and to reach persons with disabilities.

Risk of excluding already marginalized groups

However, there was also a high awareness (especially among DPOs) that digitalisation could enhance inequalities and exclude already marginalized groups further – for instance specific groups of persons with disabilities (e.g., psycho-social, intellectual, severe disabilities) if their specific participation needs were not considered. Many respondents also thought that the lack of accessibility, including the absence of standards and regulations for online formats, was a problem. Rural populations and those lacking (financial) resources to access technology were seen at high risk of being further excluded in processes of digitalisation.

Wishes for the future

In the last section of our interviews, we asked DPOs and GIZ representatives what wishes and needs regarding the participation of DPOs they had in mind. GIZ interviewees were additionally asked how they experienced internal collaboration in their organisation and what wishes they had for the GIZ's work on the topic.

DPOs wish for systematic change and changes in attitude

Especially DPO participants wished for changes in attitudes and mindsets toward DPOs. Most commonly, participants said that the recognition of DPOs as independent actors and of their skills needed to be improved. Both sides agreed on the need to strengthen DPOs further though capacity building and funding, but also through technical assistance.

DPO respondents highlighted the need for systematic changes, mostly referring to the need for changes on legal and policy levels, as well as in development work that would ensure DPO participation in all project stages and not just in disability-specific projects. Remarkably this corresponds also to the most common theme that emerged from GIZ answers: the need for systematic changes which would make DPO participation standard/ a mandatory requirement in GIZ processes and in all project phases.

Varying perceptions of how well topic is addressed within GIZ

Interestingly, opinions and experiences on the collaboration inside the GIZ were quite contrasting. Some GIZ interviewees observed increasing awareness for the topic of participation/ inclusion of persons with disabilities and thought that it was a priority internally. Others mentioned that there was "still a lot to do" and that the topic does not get the attention and resources it deserves. Half of respondents collaborated with other GIZ projects on the topic of DPO participation.

Need for systematic and mindset changes within the GIZ

A majority of GIZ participants saw the need for a change of mindset within the GIZ, stating that systematic changes could not be successful without changes in attitude. In this context many also highlighted the need to improve the capacities and knowledge of GIZ employees on how to involve

DPOs effectively, partly referring to the need for realistic practice-oriented approaches and guidance. These articulated wishes highlight the importance of efforts to develop a toolbox for effective participation.

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